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ABSTRACT

A preliminary review of the literature indicates that previous research undertaken to identify communication competencies by those in business produced a wide range of findings. The studies may be placed in one or more of the following categories: geographically limited in population, limited solely to business executives, or concerned only with identifying those communication skills presently needed by businessmen. As a result of this brief review, the following recommendations are made: the procedures and results of past studies should be analyzed toward the end of synthesizing the available research, and, given the procedural shortcomings identified here, a national survey of those who teach business or organizational communication should be conducted. (RB)

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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATIONS OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION BEHAVIORS

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A Critical Analysis of Empirical Investigations of Business Communication Behaviors

The participants of the 1972 Speech Communication Association (SCA) Summer Conference discussed the problems of developing adequate communication career education programs. They concluded that "speech communication courses might be better taught in relation to student career needs (Brilhart, 1972, p. 83)." Prior to acting on that conclusion, a group composed of communication experts and businessmen recommended that SCA first "analyze the communication competencies common to business and the professions (Brilhart, 1972, p. 82)."

In similar fashion, the Undergraduate Studies Committee of the American Business Communication Association (ABCA) concluded in December, 1972 that "business curricula can . . .better meet the communication needs [p. 3]" of those entering a business or professional life. The committee recommended that both former students and members of the business communication teaching profession should be querried annually as to the communication demands of business.

Recently, the need to identify critical behaviors or competencies in all areas of education has been influenced by the concept of accountability (Young, 1971). The key to implementing educational accountability (i.e., balancing dollar input with learning output) lies in the specification of educational goals and objectives (Findley, 1972; Smythe, Kibler & Hutchings, 1973). In turn, the key to specifying goals lies in identifying those behaviors and skills critical to the student's future needs (Kibler, Barker & Miles, 1970).

In terms of business communication, emphasis must be placed on the communication skills which graduating students entering business will need and use the most. Hatch (1972), in a discussion of behavioral objectives and business communication, writes that in planning a business communication course one must first determine what the student should be able to do at the end of the course. The most obvious answer is that the student should demonstrate proficiency in the communication skills he will eventually use in business. Before pedagogical strategies can be devised to facilitate the student's acquisition of those skills, the critical behaviors must be identified.

In view of the SCA and ABCA conclusions that essential business communication competencies must still be verified, one needs to question the validity of previous research in the area. In their review of the business communication literature, Sexton and Staudt (1959) reported a "dearth of sound, adequately planned and carefully designed research [p. 16]." Eleven years later, Wise (1970) reviewed the literature relevant to business communication instruction from 1957-1967. She also concluded that there was little empirical research in the area of business communication in which high confidence could be placed. Therefore, it seems important to review previous investigations for the purpose of identifying methodological shortcomings that limit the usefulness

of the findings. Once these shortcomings have been isolated, research correcting previous flaws can be conducted yielding more useful results for those who teach business communication. The following review of existing research provides a brief review of the available findings and a discussion of three procedural limitations present in the research.

Review

Previous research undertaken to identify communication competencies required by those in business has been plentiful. Numerous surveys have been conducted, and many executives have been interviewed. These efforts have produced a wide range of findings concerning the relationship between communication skills and business.

The "single most consistent finding of these studies . . .is this: Companies want people who can communicate (Hatch, 1972, p. 19)." A search of the literature by the ABCA Undergraduate Studies Committee (1973) indicated that virtually all representatives of business rank preparation in business communication at or near the top of any list of needs for optimum business performance [p. 2]." The ability to communicate effectively was rated at the top of a poll of factors involved in "The Positive Image of Success" (Bowman, 1964). The results of all studies support the general claim that effective communication is important to success in business (Bennett, 1971; Clark, 1968; Hicks, 1955; Lord, 1969; Weeks, 1972; Zaugg, 1972).

In her review of ten years of literature concerning business communication instruction, Wise (1970) concluded that "there appeared to be a developing trend toward increasing emphasis on all verbal proficiencies utilized in business communication (p. 145)." Roethlisberger (1941) concluded from his study of business executives that their environment consisted largely of verbal communication. His findings were confirmed by Goetzinger and Valentine (1962, 1963), who found that their subjects spent approximately 80% of their time communicating orally. Hartranft (1966) found that 3/4 of the 100 largest companies and industries in the United States offered oral communication training or thought it would be profitable. Others have reported similar findings about the apparent increasing emphasis given oral communication skills (Brisley, 1957; Morrow, 1970; Tacey, 1960; Samovar, Brooks & Porter, 1969).

Other investigators have identified a variety of specific communication competencies required by those in business situations. Participants in a survey by Zacharias (1968) designated persuasive speaking, communicating technical information, listening, and group discussion as the most important areas in communication instruction. In a survey of engineers, 74% expressed a need for skill in the oral presentation of statistical and technical reports (Dubin & Marlow, 1965). Zelko (1962), in a comparison of management practices and oral communication competencies, found that skill is needed in conference leadership and participation, and listening. Angrist (1953) found that executives need to be able to comment quickly and to the point when called upon by a superior.

As this brief review suggests, critical speech communication needs for businessmen can be identified, even to the point of including specific oral communication competencies. Although very specific communication behaviors have been identified, closer inspection of the previous research reveals a number of methodological weaknesses. The studies reviewed may be placed in one or

more of the following categories: 1) geographically limited in population; 2) limited solely to business executives; or 3) concerned only with identifying those communication skills presently needed by businessmen.

Geographic Limitations

The majority of the previous investigations have been lacking in geographic representativeness. Investigations of the business needs of executives have been made in California (Bennett, 1971), Indiana (Zacharias, 1968), the New York City area (Sayles, 1963), Pennsylvania (Dubin & Marlow, 1965; Dubin, Alderman & Marlow, 1968), Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (Tacey, 1960), and Toledo, Ohio (Zaugg, 1973). Very few studies have involved a national sample of business executives (Bowman, 1964; Clark, 1968). A more limiting form of geographic limitation has resulted from investigations of a particular company (Brisley, 1957; Simmons, 1961) or combination of companies (Elliot, 1962; Jain, 1971; Madden, 1967; Nilsen, 1953; Tacey, 1960).

The unfortunate consequence of geographically limiting the population is the inability of the investigator to validly extend his findings any further than the particular population he examined. The extent to which the communication needs of executives in company X or city Y can be generalized to include all business executives is questionable. Likewise, the extent to which findings in one organizational structure can be applied to a company exhibiting a different structure is equally questionable. In one of the earliest attempts to identify communication skills needed by businessmen, Angrist (1953) concluded that the findings of his study applied "most directly to the 273 executives who co-operated in the research [p. 284]." Due to the limited settings of the majority of the studies, the findings cannot be generally considered representative of the entire national business community.

Business Executives

Members of the ABCA conference on business communication needs (1972) recommended that members engaged in identifying business communication competencies "should themselves serve as a 'panel of experts' so that their opinions and learning about the communications demands of business can be reported [p. 4]." Research to date has completely ignored those who teach business or organizational communication. Assuming that university faculties are familiar with the current literature and new developments, as well as the projections for future needs, it seems reasonable to assume that their opinion is of value (Dubin & Marlow, 1965). One cannot escape the need for informed opinion or judgment when making decisions about future plans and actions. The solicitation of expert opinion is most applicable "when policies and plans have to be based on informed judgment (Helmer, 1966, p. 1)."

Only two of the studies examined reported the opinions of those who teach business communication. Clark (1968) attempted to ascertain the "advisability of including certain content and experience in business communications and other courses [p. 10-A]" from a panel of ten professors in business administration at the University of Michigan. Hines (1971) found that educators from the United States and New Zealand recommended the same ten courses as most important for business students.

The decisions about what to teach in a business or organizational communication course will ultimately be based on the judgments of those who will teach the course. By limiting past studies only to the opinions of those in business, a large reservoir of expert opinion based on the experiences of observation, research and teaching, has not been efficiently tapped.

Future Needs

The most seriour weakness of prior research has been the apparent misconception that by identifying current needs one can predict future needs. There has been a total disregard of the critical communication behaviors of students who will be entering the business world as soon as five years from now. Participants in previous research have responded, not in relation to the needs of future businessmen, but in relation only to the present requirements of those in or about to enter business. Without identifying those critical communication skills required by future graduates, it is doubtful that sound educational objectives can be established.

Recommendations

Previous research, then, has been particularly weak when one considers the limited populations sampled and the apparent lack of concern about future needs. Given these shortcomings, the validity and utility of the findings remains questionable. Assuming that there is some merit in specifying critical needs and educational objectives in the area of business and organizational communication, one would hope for further research sound in design and execution.

Toward this end, this writer recommends that:

1. The vast body of previous research be collated. Rather than compiling lists or annotated bibliographies, the procedures and results of past studies should be analyzed toward the end of synthesizing the available research. In this manner, the findings of studies limited in geographic area and population could be compared for similarities and differences in the identified communication skills common or unique to the various business occupations and organizational settings studied. The synthesization would also allow for the identification of other variables that have not yet been properly investigated (e.g., sex, race).

2. Given the procedural shortcomings identified in this paper, a national survey of those who teach business or organizational communication should be conducted. The purpose of this survey should be to determine the critical communication skills which will be needed by those graduating from colleges and universities and entering the business/industrial world in the future (i.e., five-ten years). The survey should be repeated periodically, allowing for a continual reassessment of essential communication competencies. A study of this nature would aid in defining the parameters of business and organizational communication and result in expert judgment on the future directions business and organizational courses should take. With the information provided by this survey, educators could better plan their courses with the goal of maximizing the derived benefits to students.

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